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ABSTRACT

The mission of the Highlander Folk School (Tennessee), which flourished between 1932 and 1961, was intimately intertwined with the labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Highlander began as an Appalachian community school seeking to understand the issues and problems of the community it served. By the late 1930s, Highlander had committed its resources to residential programs that emphasized developing new labor union leadership. Students were primarily officers, organizers, and members of Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions. By the 1940s, the school was perceived as a progressive CIO education center, promoting the social integration of all races, religions, and sexes. Following World War II, Highlander was accused of being communist-inspired and became a liability to the CIO. It resisted cooptation into corporate trade unionism in the 1950s and reemerged in the 1960s with "bottom-up" training programs for the leaders of the new civil rights movement. Highlander's history can be used as a barometer to understand the rise and fall of the labor movement, and also as an example of how education relates to social movements. A list of 17 references is appended. (FMW)

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HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT, 1932-1953

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Introduction

"It is a major purpose of the school to develop leaders for the southern labor movement from among our own southern workers."
Highlander students, The Snag, July 10, 1935

It is commonly said that timing is everything. For Highlander Folk School this statement holds great meaning. Highlander Folk School flourished between 1932 and 1961 as a school serving social movements. As a labor school, its tenure ended in 1953 after a twenty year period which paralleled the industrial labor movement during the formative years of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). In the late 1940s this adult education center started developing a civil rights agenda which reached full maturity by the middle 1950s. In co-founder Myles Horton's words, "The best educational work at Highlander has always taken place when there is social movement. We've guessed right on two social movements--the labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s, and the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. During movement times, the people have the same problems and can go from one community to the next, start a conversation in one place and finish it in another." (Horton, 1990, p.84)

The historical evidence is persuasive that Highlander's staff and supporters saw the mission of the school as intimately intertwined with social movements. Yet, most historical analysis of this alternative adult education center overlooks its relationship to movements, focusing, instead, on institutional histories related to folk schools, workers' education and adult education. Rubenson argues that there has been little research

into the role of education in social movements among North American researchers. "This omission in the literature of counterhegemonic education might be interpreted as another example of the institutionalization of education and its contribution to the dominant culture's hegemony."(1989, p.58) The history of Highlander serves as an example of how adult education can relate to social movements.

This research seeks to revisit and analyze both Highlander and the industrial labor movement from a social-historical framework. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section begins by providing a brief interpretive history of the labor movement, followed by a summary of Highlander's relationship to the movement. The second section first presents a traditional perspective, based in a conflict paradigm, of social movements. The concept of "new social movements" is then developed relative to this traditional prespective. The final part of this section discusses mobilization as an educational process essential to the vitality of any social movement. The third section synthesizes the history of Highlander as a CIO labor school with the conceptual framework of social movements, and draws some conclusions why Highlander and the CIO split. Special emphasis is placed on Highlander's contribution to mobilizing workers and nurturing leadership within the industrial labor movement.

The assumptions of this author are, first, social movements are expressions of social conflict and transformations which seek to both preserve and alter social hierarchies and

values. Second, education within any social movement becomes a site of contestation where notions of ethics, history, cultural values, and societal goals are influenced and codified. And third, education which is instrumental to all movements is never a social movement in and of itself. Hence, phrases such as the public school movement, the folk school movement, and the recent literacy movement, are misnomers.

Highlander and the Labor Movement

Alan Dawley reconstructs labor history into three major periods. The first is from the 1890s through the 1920s when big business established control over capital and over society. Even though the industrial working class grew to its highest levels, an effective movement to impact social injustices within labor failed to materialize. The second period is from the Great Depression to the early 1970s, when "capital and labor arrived at what may be regarded as a postponed social compromise, with the federal government presiding as chief mediator." The third is from the 1970s to the present when "the Great Compromise broke down."(1990, p.153)

The growing social imbalance between capital and labor, society's economic dependence upon business for leadership and planning, and business's unwillingness to tolerate and negotiate with organized labor set the stage for the Great Depression. Although labor had successfully been able to win concessions from business in the 1890s and 1900s, by the 1920s organized labor was on its death bed and unable to revive itself. Even with big

business's failure to save the nation's economy from the throes of collapse, labor remained impotent in its ability to develop viable economic alternatives.

Government intervention via the New Deal emerged as the great equalizer and mediator between business and labor. The working class did not earn its new power base, the state gave it to them, first with the Norris-LaGuardia Act in 1932 and then with the Wagner Act in 1935. Roosevelt's recovery plan focused on three policies: a public works program, self-restraint by business, and collective bargaining. Section 7(a) in the National Industrial Recovery Act giving workers the right to organize their own collective bargaining unit opened the flood gates to the labor movement. Between 1933 and World War II, estimates had union membership grow from 2.8 to 8.4 million workers.(Berstein, p.769) With the growth in the industrial labor movement emerged a revitalized and dominant Democratic Party and increased government intervention. The CIO emerged as the new agent to organize industrial workers and, "thus, the labor movement came to rely on all aspects of the state--law, bureaucracy, party--to gain new rights and privileges."(Dawley, p.171)

By the early 1940s, American business was able to use the same laws which had ignited labor five years earlier to control and stabilize labor. Melvyn Dubofsky raises three probing questions which are relevant to understanding Highlander's history. "(1) Why did labor militancy decline? (2) Why did militant, radical rank-and-file struggles produce old-fashioned,

autocratically controlled trade unions in many cases? (3) Why did the turbulence (of the 1930s) create no lasting mass radical political movement."(p.206) As Dubofsky interprets this history, it was the New Deal, Roosevelt, and the federal government which animated the labor movement and controlled labor's leaders. During this period, a revolutionary situation never emerged. In contrast, it was difficult to generate rank-and-file action when, in fact, workers desired stability and predictability as much as did government and business.(p.223) Possibly, there were too many forces resisting the social change agenda which would have resulted in permanent redistribution of both power and wealth.

For Highlander, the changing reality and rules of the industrial labor movement foreshadowed growing pressure to forsake its "bottoms-up" educational approach and to conform to the dictates of the CIO's leadership. For the first couple of years after being established, Highlander was a mountain community school seeking to understand the issues and problems of people it served locally. By 1934, Highlander's enlarged vision included a school for southern workers through developing first a residential program and later an extension program. By the late 1930s, Highlander pulled back from extension programs and committed its resources to residential programs which emphasized developing new union leadership. Students were primarily officers, organizers and members of CIO unions. While still maintaining its original commitment to workers, Highlander began to develop courses which taught skills required to run a union or organize workers. Throughout the 1930s, Highlander's notoriety

and effectiveness grew with the labor movement.(Glen, 1989; A. Horton, 1990)

By the 1940s, Highlander, although still an independent institution, was seen as a progressive CIO education center. Highlander's policies promoted social integration of all races, religions, and genders. Its programs were open to all people as long as they were sponsored or recommended by their union, cooperative, or organization. Following World War II, Highlander's vision of a democratic social movement confronted the reality of the institutionalization of the labor movement. Now labor's major challenge was to develop a relationship with management, not to nurture a militant rank and file.(Piven and Cloward, p.159) While Highlander initially made attempts to accommodate its sponsors, by 1946 there was a growing schism between the school and the CIO. Three major trends in the movement profoundly affected Highlander. First, the institutionalization of labor. Second, labor was developing more and more educational programs in house through education departments and locals. Third, the growing cold war climate "served to silence social critics, stifle debate and suppress political differences." (A. Horton, p.152) In 1946, Highlander's sense of rejection was compounded by CIO leaders who ignored offers from the school to help with the Southern Organizing Drive, Operation Dixie. While Highlander refused to compromise its policies, it still continued working with those individual unions in the CIO which shared common principles, especially those unions with significant numbers of blacks.

By 1947, Highlander had emerged as a liability for the CIO as the cold war and anti-leftist sentiments escalated into the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act. Repeatedly accused of being a communist-inspired school, Highlander's future with the CIO became clear when Horton refused to take loyalty oaths, when the school's executive council could not agree on a statement regarding communism, and when the staff decided to continue working with unions which were on the CIO's unofficial blacklist.(Glen, pp. 119, 121) The industrial labor movement by the late 1940s had become another manifestation of society's reactionary hysteria. In July of 1949, Highlander received a letter from the CIO Education Director informing the staff that the school would no longer be used by the CIO because of accusations by three southern labor leaders that Highlander was influenced by "left-wing 'communist'." (A. Horton., p.160) Although Highlander would continue its commitment with certain progressive unions and workers, its formal relationship with the CIO was over.

In 1951, Highlander had its "last hurrah" with labor when Myles assumed the education directorship of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA). Highlander had had a long and positive history with the UPWA since the mid-1940s. This union, although not on the CIO's blacklist, had always promoted progressive reform, most noteworthy, winning equal compensation for minorities and women with white males. Horton's goal as education director was to develop a program which nurtured new leadership, improved workers participation in union

activities, and, in general strengthened the sense of unionism within existing locals. In Horton words, "all education activities are carried on for the purpose of getting people to do things for themselves."(1952) A year later, in his letter of resignation to the union's president, Horton wrote:

> I realize that policies must be pushed from the top. Nevertheless, I am concerned with the degree to which the [education] coordinators are thought entierely [sic] as part and parcel of a power structure, which loses its ability to get acceptance by virtue of power alone, when the rank and file is reached. (1953)

Possibly Kermit Eby, former CIO Education Director and professor in labor education at the University of Chicago, best captured the essence of why the Highlander approach to education no longer fit the corporate needs of the CIO in the 1950s.

> The modern trade union, like the modern corporation, is monolithic, one huge human shaft of power directed from the top...The present policy laid down for the average union education program is that the most important thing is to teach efficiency; it is not considered necessary to develop in the rank and file the ability to question or criticize policy. (1953)

While Highlander had grown and matured with the industrial labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s, it successfully withstood co-optation into corporate trade unionism in the 1950s. With the demise of the labor movement, Highlander as a labor school died. It was reborn with the civil rights movement, only this time as a mature institution able to develop programs from the bottom-up, using Highlander's "percolator" approach to educating new leaders for a new movement.

Social Movements: A Theoretical Understanding

Analyses of social movements have centered, until recently, on social, cultural, or class disparity and conflict. Piven and Cloward emphasized collective defiance, in contrast to collective response of organizations and institutions, as the key to identifying social movements.(1977, pp.3-5) John Dewey looked at social movements as efforts to change institutions and power relations in order to achieve an "equitable system of human liberties."(1949, p.113) Gerlach and Hine defined social movements to be radical, seeking fundamental change in contrast to developmental change.(1970, p.xiii) Social movements can be analyzed within a conflict paradigm where there are two opposing forces. Education, within this paradigm, becomes a site of contestation, either in support of change or the status quo. Education seeks to integrate and commit individuals and groups to larger collective actions in order to achieve political goals and clarify societal ideals such as justice, liberty, and equality. Clearly, education cannot be a social movement unto itself. Rather, education is an instrument of power which shapes knowledge within social movements. In Dewey's words, "the power to think and to express thought is a power to do." (p.113)

Recently, there has been research into what is defined as "new social movements" or "contemporary movements." Since about the early 1970s, special interest movements or single interest movements have replaced the broader vision of old movements. Although, the industrial labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s predates the emergence of new social movements, the social

research which has addressed new social movement provides keen insight into the phenomenon of social change. Moreover, new social movements have been defined in terms of old social movements, such as the labor movement. As a result, as new social movements are analyzed, old social movements are revisited and redefined in greater clarity than was previously available in the literature.

While the goal of "old social movements" was to achieve societal goals, the goal of new social movements is centered on special interests. Segmented groups as defined by class, race, gender or religion, are not necessarily characteristic of new social movements. Finger argues that "old movements fought for the realization of ideals of modernity (freedom, justice, emancipation, etc.), while new movements fundamentally question modernity."(1989, p.16) Whereas old movements analyzed problems in terms of distribution of wealth and power, thereby seeking solutions in terms of redistribution, new movements see issues in redefining relationships with existing social and cultural institutions.

Alberto Melucci's analysis of social movements suggests there are some similarities between traditional and contemporary movements. Melucci warns against speaking about movements as if they have their own personality in terms of stereotypes. Instead we need to analyze their institutional processes. Mobilization of people and groups as social actors within collective action is essential to the life and vitality of a social movement. Mobilization of collective action is dependent upon those

educational processes which facilitate communication, negotiation, decision making and produce meaning within a particular social field.(1989)

Melucci formulates three dimensions to collective action: mobilization potential, recruitment networks, and motivation to participate.(1989, pp.30-31) Developing collective identity is integral to the formation of a collective action. Again, Melucci provides a three-dimensional framework to understanding collective identity: "formulating cognitive frameworks concerning the goals, means and environment of action; second, activating relationships among actors who communicate, negotiate, and make decisions; and third, making emotional investments, which enable actors to recognize themselves in each other."(1989, p.35) Clearly, these aspects of collective action and collective identity are part of education's contested ground in a social movement.

Conclusions

Highlander Folk School was born in 1932 into a movement. In its formative years Highlander nurtured the collective defiance of Appalachian workers who were seeking a more equitable economic system. Within a few years it grew to become a CIO-affiliated education center for the southern labor movement. In actuality, though, Highlander matured into a workers' school, and never did fit comfortably as a labor school supporting the institutionalization of labor unions.

Melucci's framework for understanding social movements in terms of collective action and collective identity seems to exemplify Highlander's role as an educational institution. Rather than burdening our understanding of the labor movement with generalizations, stereotypes and personalities, Melucci argues that we must understand those processes which form social movements. Mobilization of people is the most vital element to any movement. While the state via the New Deal opened the floodgates for labor organizing, without the massive effort by labor and its supporters to mobilize workers the movement would have failed immediately. Instead, groups and organizations were able to capitalize on the mobilization potential and generate mass participation. Highlander played a significant role in supporting recruitment and developing networks through its leadership programs. Moreover, Highlander's educational approach helped to formulate those cognitive frameworks which Melucci describes as being essential to the development of a collective framework.

Yet, Highlander became a victim of the labor movement, along with the rank and file and, in particular, the leftists within the rank and file. The anti-Communist victories in the CIO by the late 1940s signified the end of the labor movement. Leftists were the most able and committed organizers in the movement. The so-called "Communist" dominated unions were also the most democratic, continuously nurturing rank-and-file participation. With the emasculation of the left in the industrial labor movement, militancy declined sharply.

(Prickett, p.x) Although Highlander never adopted a political ideology, Horton and other staff members recognized the skill and commitment of labor's left, often times sharing the same philosophies and approach to building a democratic movement. It is, therefore, not surprising that Highlander was often painted with a "red" brush.

By analyzing the history of Highlander from a social movement perspective, we begin to see, first, how education can relate to social movements, and, second, how Highlander's history can be used as a barometer to understand the transformation of the labor movement. As a barometer of the labor movement, the history of Highlander in workers' education somewhat parallels the rise and fall of the industrial labor movement between 1932 and 1953. By World War II, when arguably the labor movement had died and corporate unions grew more dependent upon government than their workers, Highlander's role to mobilize participation and formulate cognitive frameworks ceased to exist. The later half of the 1940s and early 1950s appears to have been a time of struggle and frustration for Highlander as it tried in failure to re-established itself within a failed movement. Clearly, one of Highlander's most notable accomplishments during this period was its success in maintaining its original principles and goals as it made the transition to the civil rights movement.

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